

## ‘Next meeting of the "European Council"' from 30 Jours d'Europe (January 1975)

**Caption:** Published in January 1975 in the monthly journal 30 Jours d'Europe, this article takes a positive view of the ‘routinisation’ of European Summit Conferences, which were henceforth formalised in the form of ‘European Councils’. The routine and less formal nature of the European Council, henceforth meeting three times a year, would create favourable conditions for the gradual revival of the Community and strengthen its political decision-making capabilities.

**Source:** 30 jours d'Europe. dir. de publ. FONTAINE, François ; Réd. Chef CHASTENET, Antoine. Janvier 1975, n° 198. Paris: Service d'information des Communautés européennes. "Prochain "Conseil Européen"", auteur:L., A. , p. 7-9.

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## Before the spring

### Next meeting of the ‘European Council’

#### **The political decision-making capacity of the Community emerged strengthened from the last summit of the Heads of Government of the Nine.**

The meeting of the Heads of Government of the Nine in Paris last month was the last of its kind, the last of these ‘summits’ that have always followed the same pattern: someone proposes a summit meeting, it is prepared, it is dramatised, there is relief at its conclusion, and then it is forgotten by many. The next meetings of the Heads of Government — the first will be held before the spring, and there are to be at least three of them each year — will be very different in character: a routine and fairly secret meeting like that of a national cabinet. Such will be the proceedings of the ‘European Council’.

#### **The unblocked Community**

The three weeks that have elapsed since the ‘last summit and first European Council meeting’ have nevertheless confirmed that the meeting of 9 and 10 December achieved its fundamental aim of unblocking the work of the European institutions, of patching up the failures and frustrations that piled up on the Community day after day throughout almost the whole of 1974.

Just over a year ago, the European Community lived through the hardest winter of its brief existence. Not because the meteorological conditions were particularly inclement — on the contrary, the abnormally mild climate in January and February enabled Europeans to make a few savings on their heating bills and to stroll or cycle through the car-free streets of their towns — but because absolute stalemate reigned at Community meetings.

Instructed by the Copenhagen Summit to press ahead rapidly with the common energy policy and to launch a programme of European aid for the most disadvantaged regions of the common market, the Council of the Communities did not, strictly speaking, achieve anything. Worse than that, the conference of energy-consuming countries in Washington laid bare the disagreements between France and its European partners on the desired nature of relations with the United States. One month later, the victory of the Labour Party in the general election inevitably raised the question of whether the United Kingdom might be about to leave the Community of which it had only been a member for fifteen months, following twelve long years of knocking on the door.

Most observers believed that the Community was poised to burst asunder and wondered where the fatal blow would come from.

Today, the deep wounds inflicted on the Community during the final ill-starred weeks of 1973 and the even more disastrous start to 1974 seem to be healing — a slow process, to be sure, but a healing process nonetheless.

#### **Conditions for a gradual revival**

The last meeting of the Heads of Government succeeded not only in patching up the most abject failures of the recent past but also in creating the conditions for a gradual revival. The Nine actually took some steps towards the resolution of such basic issues as relations with the United States and the UK’s role in the Community, the energy-related and financial problems posed by the series of increases in oil prices, the functioning of the institutions, internal imbalances within the Community and the birth of a sense of European citizenship.

After a long period of disorientation, things are starting to move in the right direction in the Community. Relations with the United States are still, and will for a long time remain, a very delicate issue between European countries. This is a state of affairs with which we must learn to live, and the governments of all

Community countries, it seems, are trying to do just that. The last few months have furnished sufficient proof, for example, that France, without deviating from certain constants of its foreign policy, considers that dialogue with Washington is necessary, if difficult, while the idea that France's partners would be disposed to sacrifice everything on the altar of strict Atlanticism is an anachronistic oversimplification. This new frame of mind, which was clearly perceptible at the Paris Summit, reflects a kind of progress that is not confined to the atmosphere alone.

### **The British problem**

Another important point is the British problem. It is virtually as old as the Community itself, and it will no doubt take many years yet before two different mentalities are completely welded together. Since the December summit, however, there has been reason to hope that most of the political forces in the UK will defend the principle of their country's membership when it comes to the final crunch. This ought to have a decisive influence on public opinion, which, no doubt before the end of the summer, will have to pronounce itself once and for all on the UK's continued membership of the Community.

With 'renegotiation' not yet completed, of course, the British Government is currently focusing more attention on obtaining as many concessions as it can from its partners than on helping to expedite the general business of the Community. However, the agreement in principle reached by the Nine on the most difficult issue, namely the limitation of the British contribution to the Community budget, makes it possible to envisage a fairly quick conclusion to the discussions. It has the merit of neatly sustaining both the British case for a fair share and the French argument that 'corrections' must not undermine the fundamental principle of Community preference.

It is therefore very likely that the UK will be required to pay over to the Community its entire revenue from the customs duties and agricultural levies applied to imports from countries outside the Community but that it will be able to obtain a reduction in its contribution in terms of the amount of value-added tax payable to the Community budget.

### **Energy**

As far as energy is concerned, the Paris communiqué could not be formulated in very explicit terms. The participants knew that it was up to another summit — the meeting of Presidents Giscard d'Estaing and Ford in Martinique on 15 and 16 December — to reconcile the US strategy of a common front of consumer countries with the French strategy of avoiding confrontation with the producer countries. Admittedly, the Martinique meeting, which produced an agreement in principle, did not serve to resolve all the problems, but dialogue has been open and possible since the Paris Summit. The European Communities in particular are participating officially in the work of the International Energy Agency, created within the OECD framework, and are able to ensure that any decisions taken there are compatible with the interests of all the countries of the Community, including France, which is the only Community country that has remained outside the Agency. This was not the case before the Summit. The same type of problem could arise, incidentally, with regard to bodies such as the financial agency proposed by the United States for the recirculation of petrodollars. In each of these cases, however, it is perhaps easier to ensure that the solutions adopted by the community of Western nations to deal with energy-related and financial problems are not geared exclusively to the pursuit of strictly American interests if France remains outside the OECD agency. The absence of France could, in fact, help to preserve the role of the Council of the European Communities in the complex game played by the Western industrialised nations since the start of the oil crisis.

### **For the European citizen**

For more than two years, the British, Italian and Irish public have been hearing talk of the 'imminent' creation of a European Regional Fund. The decisions taken in Paris about its budget — relatively modest though it may be — and about the way in which European aid is to be distributed have redressed an injustice. As George Thomson, the European Commissioner responsible for regional policy, has emphasised, these decisions should help to restore confidence in the Community among millions of people.

Nor has the 'European citizen' been forgotten by the Nine. By 1976, a working group is to present a report planning the abolition of passport controls within the common market, the creation of a uniform passport for the 250 million Europeans who live in the Community and the harmonisation of aliens legislation. Granting special rights to Community citizens at the local, provincial and regional levels is a second subject for consideration on the agenda.

The principle of Community solidarity, so lamentably flouted when the oil-producing countries imposed their embargo on the Netherlands in 1973, also made a comeback in the communiqué of the Nine in connection with the convergence of our countries' economic policies.

The Ministers for Economic Affairs and Finance were entrusted with the task of reaching agreement on the policies to be adopted with a view to ensuring that convergence works towards Community solidarity and is based on effective permanent consultation machinery. This is not very new, and we need to exercise caution. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that Harold Wilson did subscribe to the aims of economic and monetary union that were set at the 1972 summit.

Far more important to the future of the 'citizens of Europe' are the decisions of the heads of government on what are known as 'institutional matters'. Europeans will henceforth be able to learn that certain decisions affecting their lives have been taken by a qualified majority of the ministers of the Nine rather than by consensus. They will also hear much talk of European union this year, particularly from the Prime Minister of Belgium, Leo Tindemans, who is to draw up a report by 31 December on the ideas with which he will be presented by the European Parliament, the European Commission and the European Court of Justice, though not without having consulted the national governments and organisations representing the various strands of public opinion. The European Parliament is also to present proposals on its election by universal suffrage. The governments will have to legislate on the basis of these proposals so that direct elections can start in 1978.

#### **'Deflation' of the summits**

At a time when the economies of our countries are threatened by a recession which is compounded by chronic inflation, it is certainly true that most citizens of the Community will not have seen, in all the decisions of the last Paris Summit, a solution to their own most pressing problems. They will at least have learned that the heads of government considered it important to meet more often, without pomp and ceremony, as a 'European Council', which should increasingly resemble the cabinets people know from their own countries and be less and less like those highly ceremonious diplomatic conferences of national leaders who retreat thereafter into the splendid isolation of their respective states.

This deflation of the summits can only strengthen the decision-making capacity of the Community. That, perhaps, is the most important legacy of the 'Last Summit in Paris'.

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